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A Somatic Poetics of Crisis Cinema: The gesture of self-harm in three Spanish films

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As the double-dip economic recession sank into Spain's psyche, a wave of cultural production, including film production, externalized its symptoms. This article looks at fiction films released since 2012 which present the (female) body as a visual site of the crisis. This is particularly the case of the films that set the parameters of my discussion: *La herida* (*Wounded*) (Fernando Franco), released in October 2013; *Stockholm* (Rodrigo Sorogoyen), released in November 2013 and *Magical Girl* (Carlos Vermut), released in October 2014. In all three, the mise-en-scène draws our attention to one striking gesture: a woman wilfully wounding her body. If we look at these seeming instances of self-harm as disconnected yet cumulative gestures that exceed the frame of narrative causality, a visual pattern starts to emerge. In *Wounded*, to alleviate situations of mounting pressure ambulance paramedic Ana (Marián Álvarez) inflicts small cuts on her body with a razor — an action that the hand-held camera records as any other of her everyday activities. In *Stockholm* a young unnamed woman (Aura Garrido) wakes up alone in the bed of the man who relentlessly pursued her the night before. She glides into the bathroom and, after washing her hands, she thumps her forehead once against the mirror over the sink. Finally, in *Magical Girl*, Bárbara (Bárbara Lennie) wakes up from a pill-induced sleep to find that her husband appears to have left the marital home. Alone in the empty flat, Bárbara slowly presses her forehead against a hanging mirror, until the glass surface cracks. A trickle of blood drips between her eyes, which Bárbara does not wipe out immediately. The scar resulting from the gash on her brow will remain visible for the rest of the film, a symptom in search of a cause (see Fig. #1).

[FIGURE #1]

Caption: **A striking gesture: Bárbara's wound in *Magical Girl* (Courtesy of Aquí y Allí Films)**

Although these films register the signs of the recessionary present, none of them thematizes the effects of the financial crisis as an explanatory framework for these characters' actions. The unpredictability of their gestures flouts the conventional logic of cause and effect. The gesture of self-harming is solipsistic and non-transitional: it goes unwitnessed by other characters, and it is devoid of social meaning. In *Stockholm* and *Magical Girl* the characters act in front of mirrors; in *Wounded*'s opening sequence Ana's rushes into a hospital toilet and her trajectory also concludes in front of a mirror. The individual focuses every shot, either close to the camera or at the centre of the wide frame, but the films refuse to individualize their characters (in *Stockholm*, the young woman is simply called 'She'). The counterpoint to the self-reflexive corporeality of these scenes is the almost complete absence of life narratives, or long-term goals. The characters' back stories are mostly elided and remain speculative: these bodies exist in the present tense, channelling forces that they do not control. In *Wounded*, Ana is unable to interact fluidly with others, except when on duty as a professional healthcare worker and in her conversations about suicide with an anonymous online friend. Whereas *Wounded* is the only one of the three films to present a case of self-harming in the clinical sense, I use this term in a displaced or loosely poetic way to refer to a contingent act that brings to the fore a disconnection between gesture and subjectivity in all three performances.

It is tempting to read the wounded female body allegorically, as a signifier of the national body in crisis. Instead, I want to propose a poetics of embodiment — or, a somatic poetics — to describe acts of diminished agency signalling the stagnation of the narrative of

social change in Spanish cinema. While the gaping gashes and unhealed wounds on the bodies of Ana, Bárbara and ‘She’ remain traces of visible evidence, gesture draws the spectator’s attention to the body as threshold between the internalisation of pain and the outward expression of dissent. For example, in the abovementioned scene in *Stockholm*, a medium-long shot of ‘She’ checking her forehead for damage cuts to an insert of her index and middle fingers smearing the white door frame with a drop of blood. This insert shifts the dynamics of the story: in the first half, the intermittent tight framing and shallow depth of field of the night-time location shots invite us to scrutinize the woman’s face, placing the spectator in the position of her pursuer. In the second half, shot in brightly lit white interiors, the emphasis shifts to her body language as the force field of outward-oriented action.

The notion of a somatic poetics allows me to explore particular performative idioms that enable the Spanish cinema of the recession to approach states of crisis. A focus on gesture and performance opens a speculative route to a cinema confronted to what Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, elaborating on Fredric Jameson’s notion of cognitive mapping describe as the ‘affectively disorienting and intellectually enigmatic character of the crisis, not to mention ... the challenges it poses for representation (2014, 177). These authors look at the ways in which, in North American recessionary cinema, sensorial experience maps out the abstract systems regulating the flow of capital and information in the neo-liberal world-system. The return to cognitive mapping thus marks a shift in focus from cinematic narratives of the crisis to an *aesthetic* of crisis cinema, where the dissonance between gesture, meaning and social context situates the subject in relation to the unrepresentable economic totality that structures his/her world (Toscano and Kinkle 2014, 7).

From a geopolitical perspective, a closer point of reference in this regard may be the performative aesthetics of the so-called ‘Greek New Wave’. Interpersonal violence and opaque, de-dramatized acting styles became the mark of key early films such as *Kynodontas*

(*Dogtooth*) (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2009) and *Attenberg* (Athina Rachel Tsangari, 2010). The impoverished function of dialogue in favour of gesture and posture, often deployed in an openly self-reflective, almost theatrical way (the animal mimicry rituals of the female protagonist in *Attenberg* is but one example) contributes to the location of trauma in the present (Nikolaidou 2014, 32). Performance works as a vehicle to articulate the sovereignty crisis through cinema, in a nation pervaded by the technocratic organisation of life around debt (Lykidis 2015). Further afield, scholars such as Martin O'Shaughnessy and Elena Gorfinkel have interrogated the pre-eminence of corporeal idioms to reflect, respectively, on systemic violence (O'Shaughnessy 2017, 2012) and vulnerable states (weariness and exhaustion as a pre-condition for work) (Gorfinkel 2012) under neoliberal regimes of labour. While the representation of work in film remains in the periphery of my discussion, in this article I specifically argue that the modes of performance and embodiment in Spanish recessionary cinema speak of the broken social links contaminated by the dynamics of neoliberal debt, which estranges subjects from their bodies. The focus on gesture and performance in films arising from the low-budget modes of production often associated with Spain's 'Other Cinema' may contribute to the historicization of a disorienting present, rejoining other forms of cognitive mapping under the crisis (cf. Toscano and Kinkle 2014, 1-26; Rosalind Galt's analysis of queer 'default cinema' from post-crisis Argentina, 2013).

Spain's 'Other Cinema' makes for an apposite general framework through which to group the films that focus my discussion. This phrase has come to designate an array of diverse forms of low-budget, almost artisanal digital production operating across the spectrum from the avant-garde to narrative fiction, with a particular stress on hybrid forms like the essay film and genre experiments (Losilla 2013). As I have argued elsewhere (Kourelou, Liz and Vidal 2014: 143-145), although retrospectively encompassing modes of non-mainstream filmmaking prior to 2009 this mode of production has gathered fresh critical

momentum (and a visible public identity) at the point of intersection with narratives of national crisis. With regard to the latter, 2012 — a date synonymous with the second shock in the double-dip economic recession — posits a turning point. The protracted rescue of the Spanish financial system propelled the country into the austerity phase of the crisis, with the conservative People's Party (PP) government implementing a wide range of cuts to basic services, from health coverage to the cultural industries.¹ The stringent austerity programme was couched in the technocratic language of economic adjustments demanded by the Troika (formed by the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank) of the European economies at risk of defaulting on their debt. The recession exponentially intensified the neo-liberal turn already well underway in Spain (Snyder 2015, 177-181), impacting on all spheres of life. The first wave of political dissent, which peaked in 2011 around the May (15-M) protests that gave rise to the *Indignadxs* movement — with its multiple iterations in the worldwide Occupy movement — represented a grassroots response oriented towards organized political action: a concerted mobilisation of affect in response to the real pain inflicted on vulnerable sectors of the Spanish population (Snyder 2015: 27-46). Post-2012, the film industry is a changed eco-system. First and second-time directors develop personal projects without the certainty provided by state subsidies, but also unfettered by regimented systems of production or the requirement for polished screenplays that subsidies usually entail. Sideways approaches to the crisis start to emerge, small-scale projects alert to

¹ Most notably, in April 2012, bypassing parliamentary decision, a royal decree reduced health coverage from universal to employment-based, a shift in policy that severely restricted the access to care of hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants as well a significant proportion to unemployed youth (which at the peak of the crisis reached 50% of the total youth population). See Legido-Quigley et al. (2013, 18-20).

indirect signs and details that make up life under the crisis (as noted by director Mar Coll, in Junkerjürgen 2015, 223-224). These films are the films *of* the crisis, but they refuse the burden of representing it — or being represented — by it.

As the crisis mutates into a discourse of *longue durée* cinema remediates this discourse in multiple forms. Drawing on Lauren Berlant and Judith Butler, Dean Allbritton correlates images of physical vulnerability to a collective sense of precarity in character dramas that directly allude to the effects of the crisis in their scripts, such as *La chispa de la vida* (*As Luck Would Have It*) (Álex de la Iglesia, 2012) or *5 metros cuadrados* (Max Lemcke, 2012). The films about the crisis assert an emergent sense of community that nevertheless depends on the continuation of political and social structures that sustain the hope of betterment through inequality, thus perpetuating precarity and putting individuals at risk. As Allbritton notes, in dialogue with Berlant, this dynamic is imbued with ‘cruel optimism’, insofar as it is predicated in relation to the fantasy of the ‘good life’ promised by capitalism, a fantasy that rules individuals’ attachments to goals and states of being that may otherwise be an obstacle to their flourishing (2014, 103-105). Modes of social cinema that hark back to the first period of government of the People’s Party (1996-2004) (Faulkner 2013, 237-250) are being revived by cinematic tales of precarity that expand the conventional aesthetic of the social film to different performative registers, from the talking-heads documentary about Spanish economic migrants making a living in Edinburgh in *En tierra extraña* (*In a Foreign Land*) (Icía Bollaín, 2014) to the musical form of the crowdfunded, anti-eviction drama *Cerca de tu casa* (‘At your doorstep’) (Eduard Cortés, 2016). These films are geared to the same representational goal; arguably they partake in the ‘growing ethos that has begun to define a certain collective experience of life in Spain, the “event” of the Spanish Crisis.’ (Allbritton 2014: 104). By giving narrative shape and visual consistency to the subject’s emotional experience in the face of catastrophe (becoming a migrant worker by

necessity; the threat of being left without a roof over one's head) these personalized stories restore a sense of citizenship and community through media participation in a shared public space (cf. Labrador Méndez 2012) at both the level of production and representation. They are, by default, oriented to a (beyond the crisis) future.

In contrast, the stretched-out duration of the event into a state of things, and the instability of the structures that make possible sustained cultural production (as noted with regards to the film industry) are *felt* in other kinds of works. In his analysis of the photographic project *El último verano* (*The Last Summer*, by the Madrid-based Nophoto photography collective) which records the uneventful summer 2012, Jonathan Snyder highlights this work as an index of the re-organization of social life around a more or less permanent state of crisis. For Snyder, the financial crisis, the housing crisis, the political crisis of governance, or the sheer crisis of survival penetrates the everyday at all levels, from casual conversations to media debates. These disparate and non-commensurable factors have led to the quotidianisation of the state of crisis (2015, 145). As Snyder puts it, 'subjects traverse the everyday structured in part by ongoing crises in which, perceptibly, life is somehow no longer as it was' (2015, 145). There is a marked shift from crisis as event to crisis as repetition, in which the multiple forms of sensing the crisis structure subjective experience in ways that are not always semantically connected to the quantifiable losses affecting individuals and institutions (2015, 148, 151-154). Rather, the casual images in *The Last Summer* are permeated with a sense of suspended life; the 'estranged and estranging collective portrait of the historical present in waiting' (Snyder 2015, 147). Likewise the films under investigation interrogate the sustainability of life in states of diminished agency: *Wounded* scrutinizes one character's quotidian gestures for signs of self-destructive behaviour; in *Stockholm* the risk implied in the seduction narrative is taken to the extreme. Finally, the network narrative that joins the five characters in *Magical Girl* is held together

by mysterious links of debt and obligation. The juxtaposition of isolated moments of self-harm in three films of varying tones and scales is warranted, not by what the films *show* but by the ways in which sensible information refers to what we do *not* know. The ambivalence towards consensual forms of realism evokes what Berlant calls ‘situation tragedy’, a new genre of social time imbued with a ‘menacing new realism’ in which ‘the subject’s world is fragile beyond repair, one gesture away from losing all access to sustaining its fantasies: the situation threatens utter, abject unravelling’ (2011, 6; see also Berlant in Allbritton 2014 and Snyder 2015). Paradoxically, self-harming (and putting themselves in harm’s way, like ‘She’ and Bárbara do in *Stockholm* and *Magical Girl*, respectively) is that gesture of deterrence against loss.

Affective labour and self-harm in *Wounded*

In *Wounded*, the camera stays permanently focused on Ana, a woman in her early thirties who works as a state healthcare worker transporting mentally disabled and terminally ill patients in an ambulance. Ana lives alone with her mother in a two-bedroom flat, where she routinely self-harms behind her locked bedroom door, or in the bathroom. The film constructs a map of personal relationships through Ana’s point of view. These include her fraught intimacy with her mother, who shows tenderness but refuses to confront the daughter’s dysfunction, and her day-to-day interactions with a supportive co-worker who is unaware of her acts of self-harm, and with various patients. Two private encounters in public spaces act as narrative turning points: a reunion with her estranged father causes Ana to have a breakdown and, at the end of the film, Ana seeks out a boyfriend whom she has presented to others as a stable partner. Unwilling to accept that their relationship is over, his outright rejection comes as a blow. Ana drives away, and a long take captures her intense sobbing and weeping in the car – tears replacing trickles of blood as a mode of alleviating dejection.

A linear account of plot events hardly conveys the relentless, solitary nature of the experience painstakingly rendered by the film. The opening scene sets in motion a series of patterned actions. Ana is standing by the ambulance, having a cigarette break, when a text message (the contents of which remain hidden to the spectator) visibly throws her into a state of turmoil. We notice a slight trembling of the cigarette between her fingers; her gaze becomes unfocused and her breath accelerates. She abruptly leaves the ambulance and heads for the hospital building at brisk pace; the camera picks up Ana from inside as she steps into a toilet and slides down the door, falling onto the ground. Breathing heavily, she frantically searches for something in her right pocket, which she does not find (we will later learn that Ana usually carries a small box of razors on her).² She bangs her head against the door once in frustration, before slowly calming down and getting back on her feet. Ana rinses her face in front of the mirror, then exits the toilet and returns to her original post by the ambulance. The scene is shot in two long takes (lasting one minute and forty seconds, and one minute ten seconds respectively). The camera remains on Ana's face as she stands, and tracks her forward motion from behind the back of her neck when she starts walking. Walking shots in which the hand-held camera follows Ana or moves laterally alongside her structure the peripatetic plot, while tight close-ups or medium close-ups restrict our knowledge of the environment to Ana's reaction to a new place or personal encounter. The quotidian is

² This detail was brought to my attention by Fernando Franco in a film analysis workshop he conducted at the University Jaume I de Castelló, Spain on 23 July 2015. I am grateful to Franco for sharing his insights into *Wounded*'s technical aspects and dramatic construction, some of which inform my analysis. For a detailed look at the use of sound and space in *Wounded*, as well as Marian Álvarez's performance, see Franco's commentary track in *La herida*. DVD Cameo Media, 2014.

nevertheless subverted through the alternation between Ana's repetitive displacements as a paramedic in charge of transfers, and her cyclical acts of self-harm. Locking herself up in her bedroom, taking sleeping pills, smoking joints, keeping an eye on the wristwatch that alerts her of her mother's arrival at their flat, and sharing thoughts of suicide and anxiety dreams online are part of a routine that stresses the disconnection between the character's self-evident ability to care for patients and her apparent inability to care for herself or sustain meaningful interactions with those next to her. The limited visual field we are afforded when Ana sits in the ambulance, in her bedroom or in other private places where she inflicts small cuts to her forearms and legs create subtle continuities between these enclosed spaces of work and non-work (see **Fig #2, #3 and #4**).

[FIGURES #2, #3 and #4] (tiled)

Caption: **Spaces and restricted point of view in *Wounded* (Courtesy of Ferdydurke Films)**

Although the film eschews any cause-effect links between labour and illness, or between illness and economic context, the weaving of low-intensity self-aggression into Ana's everyday activities brings into focus a vision of affective labour (work in the service sector that relies on human contact and generates immaterial gains) that is able to foster temporary bonds (such as the relationship between Ana and Martín, a declining Alzheimer sufferer) but is scarcely conducive to empowerment or the production of a durable community. *Wounded* subtly registers the exploitative alignment of affective labour with women's work lacking durable social gains (cf. Michael Hardt 1999, 95-97). In relation to *Rosetta* (Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, 1999), a film about precarity in its purest form, Martin O'Shaughnessy refers to a cinema of the social fragment 'characterized by the absence of an explicit politics ...

where individuals and groups are becoming detached and where struggles are becoming raw and corporeal ... [a cinema] in which a sense of overarching social connectivity is precisely what is lacking' (2007, 99-100). *Wounded* broadens this notion, serving as clue to modes of experience *after* collectivity. In this respect, the film's narrow focus and nearly clinical scrutiny of one woman's particular experience of mental disorder, as well as the limited glimpses into her social environment and family history negate a sense of the crisis as 'event' liable to open a space for political consciousness which, as O'Shaughnessy observes in relation to *Rosetta*, remains unavailable to the main character. And yet the mise-en-scène and camerawork anchor Ana in the present with pressing urgency. In the first long take in the opening sequence, the off-screen ambient sound as well as the peripheral areas of the shot pick up signs of a demonstration staged by medical staff gathered on the hospital's entrance steps. Alone in the flat, an off-screen television set delivers fragments of a news report which bring into the privacy of Ana's home signs of ongoing social turmoil. Ana appears unreceptive to this information, but her body somatizes negative affects. When she is overcome by a spontaneous nosebleed during the reunion with her estranged father at his wedding (a fraught bond that is suggested as a possible foundation for Ana's trauma) the thick drop of blood suddenly blotting her pale countenance is a shocking instance of Ana's body memory taking over where her consciousness is unable to recall. In a state of panic, Ana runs away from the wedding reception, only to conclude the night further cutting herself in the shower of a hotel where she tries to assuage her anxiety through drink and anonymous, frustrated sex. Excessive body disciplining and the outward signs of somatic protest become indistinguishable as forms of subjection to, and escape from environmental pressure.

Failing femininity and non-compliance in *Stockholm*

Allbritton eloquently puts the question: ‘When vulnerability is stretched to the limit, an open wound exposed to the air, what is left for the individual?’ (2014, 102). The inability to construct community out of a shared sense of precarity exposes the atomized subjectivity of the social actor, but also her lack of tools to resist. The question becomes more pressing when we specifically consider how the precarious body is gendered by default (Hardt 1999, 98). Whereas a full engagement with the debates on gender and the crisis lies beyond the scope of this piece, it should be noted that, in contrast to masculinity in crisis (cf. Castillo Villanueva 2016), the figure of the failing woman is near invisible in recessionary representations except as something else: whether as part of a generation defined by youth (*In a Foreign Land*), as the linchpin of the family in maternal drama (*Cerca de tu casa*) or as masculinized agent — for example, in *La punta del iceberg* (*The Tip of the Iceberg*) (David Cánovas, 2016) a female manager is assigned to investigate a series of male suicides in the high-pressure corporate workplace. In their work on American media, Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker forcefully argue that ‘underpinning the compelling rhetoric of masculine crisis is not only the suggestion that men are the primary victims of recession...but also that equality is a concern to be reserved for times of plenty’ (2014, 2).

In this respect, *Stockholm* illuminates a different form of gendered precarity at the core of a normative social scenario: courtship and the formation of the heterosexual couple. A micro-budget film completed outside the industrial structures of Spanish cinema (*Stockholm* was shot on a reported budget of 60,000 EUR, 13,000 of which were raised through the crowdfunding platform Verkami [Anonymous 2017]), the film explores violence in gender relations as a generational phenomenon, as noted by the filmmakers themselves (Sorogoyen, Peña, Pereira and Soler, 2014). The film rests on the archetypal articulation of gender roles — the plot involves only two anonymous characters, ‘He’ and ‘She’ — and a high-concept premise: the juxtaposition of sharply differentiated film styles and genres. In the first part of

the film, ‘He’ aggressively pursues a woman he has met at a party into giving in to his sexual advances; in the second part, after having spent the night in the man’s apartment ‘She’ refuses to leave despite his nudging her to vacate his place in the morning. A couple is formed through a scenario of male abduction and female ‘Stockholm’ syndrome. The first half of the film taps into familiar tropes of the urban romcom (the meet cute is followed by prolonged banter during a nocturnal stroll across downtown Madrid locations). The tone radically shifts in the second half, as the film turns into something closer to the home-invasion horror scenario. ‘She’ locks him up, hides the keys, and clings to him. ‘He’ becomes furious and holds her at an arm’s length. The tone of their morning interactions quickly sours. When the confrontation starts turning into premature reconciliation ‘She’ jumps off the terrace on top of the building in a slow, seemingly calculated leap into the void.

Stockholm’s performative exploration of intimacy and sexual consent closes with the ultimate gesture of female self-harm. Her suicide takes compliance to the logical end (she concedes to removing herself from the apartment); it is also a contingent gesture that abruptly disavows the fantasy of intimacy. Borrowing from Berlant, I would argue that the menacing realism of *Stockholm* lies in the recasting of the familiar terms of its normative scenario into a crisis of biopower. Paraphrasing Michel Foucault, Berlant describes agency under a regime of biopower as ‘collective living on, where living increasingly becomes a scene of the administration, discipline, and recalibration of what constitutes health’ (2011, 97), that is, the regulation of the gendered body in line with modes of capitalist sociality. In *Wounded*, Ana’s climactic breakdown at her father’s wedding takes place in the only scene in which she has overly feminized her appearance in accordance with the requirements of the social occasion (up to this scene she is presented either wearing unisex working clothes or in androgynous casual attire). However, the injunction to comply with a correct performance of femininity is met with a failed self-management of bodily affect. In *Stockholm*, the first indication of the

young woman's lack of compliance is her neglecting to take her pills in the morning, as instructed by her mother over the phone. Regulated by medication and self-surveillance, the overly pathological bodies of Ana, 'She' and, as we will see, Bárbara (in *Magical Girl*), superficially preclude a critique of neoliberal biopolitics under the crisis. Their dysfunction lies outside their social identities and their whiteness appears to solicit the camera's voyeurism. And yet, a film such as *[SAFE]* (1995), Todd Haynes's classic critique of biopolitics under neoliberal governance in 1980s U.S. sets a powerful precedent for thinking about how and why the afflicted female body (even when white and privileged), by drawing attention to the broken link between subjectivity and politics in the domestic spaces of capitalism, effectively becomes a precarious body. Returning to *Stockholm*, in the second section of the film ('the morning after') Garrido's corporeal language markedly changes with respect to the first part. Her moves become excruciatingly slow and arduous within the harshly bright, static interiors shots. Her hair is pulled back from her face into a tight bun, and she wears black eye-liner that stands out over her light-blue eyes and her exceedingly pale countenance. These choices, together with the use of deframings (e.g. his head is cut off the frame during their perfunctory exchange over breakfast, shot in a long take, **see Fig. #5**) push her body visually to the fore. The mise-en-scène gets literally smeared with bodily symptoms, of which the most explicit is her gesture of rubbing the blood off her fingers and onto the white frame of a door, as previously described.

[FIGURE #5]

Caption: **Bodily symptoms: the morning after in *Stockholm* (Courtesy of Caballo Films)**

Like the stain she leaves on the white door frame, her body posits a disturbance in the orderly, clean, white flat of the man who persuaded her to give in to casual sex the previous

night, and now demands that ‘She’ leave. ‘She’ refuses to vacate his space and to consider the transaction concluded: ‘I am not leaving’ — ‘She’ protests. ‘I am sick and tired of doing things I don’t want to do’. The stain henceforth becomes the first of a chain of increasingly bolder violations both of the logic of film genre, and of the self-regulation of woman’s sexualized body. Neither her refusal, nor her unheeded plea for help (as the discussion heats up, ‘She’ asks him: ‘if I ask you to stay with me because right now I can’t be alone, what would you say to me?’) interrupt their compulsive game-playing. Her final gesture turns the romcom premise into a full-fledged ‘situation tragedy’ (as per Berlant) that denies the fantasies of autonomy and self-sufficiency underlying normativity. Interpersonal relationships, the ultimate source of hope, are also the ultimate source of harm.

Magical Girl: The perverse logic of debt

Gashes, wounds and blood constitute, as we have seen, a disturbance of the mise-en-scène of normativity under capitalist modes of sociality (whether work-related, familial or sexual), turning the precarious body into a site of anxiety poised between compliance and protest. Like *Wounded* and *Stockholm*, *Magical Girl* is haunted by the state of crisis, which is somatized into images of female physical vulnerability. Alicia, a twelve-year old girl dying of leukaemia desires an expensive dress that will allow her to transform herself into ‘Magical Girl Yukiko’, a character from Japanese anime. Her desire pushes Luis, her father, a jobless teacher barely getting by during the recession to blackmail Bárbara after a chance sexual encounter. Bárbara lives in a state of dependency on her psychiatrist husband Alfredo, who provides economic stability and regulates her body by exerting control over her medication. The story is bookended by two scenes between Bárbara and Damián, her former teacher, who has fulfilled a jail sentence for an unnamed crime connected to Bárbara. In order to accrue enough capital to pay Luis off, unbeknownst to her husband Bárbara twice subjects herself to

an unspecified assignment involving extreme sexual violence in a mysterious location, at the command of the wheelchair-bound Oliver Zoco. Badly injured after the second visit to Zoco's mansion, Bárbara turns to Damián, compelling him to take revenge on Luis, whom he shoots in cold blood. But Damián is forced to kill Alicia too when he steps into Luis's flat and is silently confronted by the girl, who stands before him wearing the magical girl gown acquired by her father with the money extorted from Bárbara.

Genre themes associated with melodrama and film noir, such as parental love threatened by the loss of a child, blackmail arising from sexual trespass, or the inevitability of revenge bind together a pessimistic, self-enclosed universe in which all adult characters are morally ambiguous, their positions continuously shifting between exploited and exploiter. However, rather than working through the totalising rules of genre *Magical Girl* can be best described as another instance of the cinema of the social fragment. Ambitious narrative ellipses, unknown back stories, and a lack of social connectivity crystallize into performances whose downbeat rhythms and detachment de-familiarize the everyday spaces, roles (the main male characters are both former school teachers) and situations presented in the film. In this respect, comparisons can be drawn between *Magical Girl* and the films of the Greek New Wave. Ina Karkani has pursued the parallel between Spanish and Greek films of the crisis through what she calls the 'desubjectification' of the self (in the Foucauldian sense) created by cinematic representations of space tinged with economic and social decay. For Karkani, motifs such as language's loss of representational value, states of withdrawal and the on-screen interrogation of (often extreme) physicality brings together films such as *Dogtooth* and *Wounded* (2016, 2023). Her analysis points out how the cinematic production of spaces of economic and social recession obeys to a visual rhetoric that articulates states of crisis, precluding merely metaphorical readings of the crisis (2016: 209).

This reflection equally applies to performance in *Magical Girl*, with one exception I will return to. Two-shots tend to place characters at opposite ends of the frame. Actors are filmed from static camera angles through doorways and corridors that restrict their movement within the shot. Minimal camera movement limits off-screen space to aural impressions and often makes characters look imprisoned. Performances appear devoid of naturalism, with flashes of dialogue mining potentially dramatic situations for absurdist humour. Intuiting that she does not have long to live, Alicia joylessly asks her father for a gin tonic and a cigarette over lunch, as if to tick off the boxes of adult pleasures she may never get to know. Bárbara is de-sensitized to her environment; her inability to empathize with others manifests in awkward interactions: she candidly jokes about pushing some friends' baby through the window and, in her one face-to-face encounter with Luis, she declares herself a satisfied consumer of television reality shows that invade people's privacy, before inappropriately asking him for a hug. Once more, the film's plot does not register the notion of crisis as an event, but performances signal a permanent state of dissociation as well as socially disconnected lives.

In *Magical Girl*, social bonds have been replaced by entanglements that bring characters together through negative affects. Luis exploits Bárbara's psychological and financial vulnerability; Damián admits to his fear of Bárbara to his counsellor; Bárbara passively accepts her subjugation to Alfredo and adopts extreme measures when he threatens to leave her; once her body is destroyed, she uses her physical helplessness to coerce Damián to take revenge on her behalf. These ties are effected through debt, which underscores the characters' states of diminished agency. But it is Bárbara's body in particular that bears the brunt of this dynamic to its extreme, but seemingly logical end. In order to preserve her sheltered life and the illusion of normality, Barbara puts herself in harm's way, voluntarily subjecting her body to unseen acts of aggression that become increasingly brutal. The

implausible and perverse nature of this choice did not pass unnoticed to reviewers (e.g. Bruges 2014), with one review comparing Bárbara's self-inflicted pain to Séverine's sado-masochistic arrangements in *Belle de Jour* (Luis Buñuel, 1967) (Peleato 2015). Her two successive trips to the Gothic *maison close* administered by mysterious patron Zoco — an enigmatic Wizard of Oz-like figure willing to grant Bárbara her wish, for a price — are structured as Bárbara's retreat into a fantasy scenario against the grain of the dominant *mise-en-scène* of the social. The opaque symbols that Bárbara encounters along the way give these scenes a fairy-tale tone: a door is marked with a drawing of a black lizard, and a card containing a 'magic' word ('*hojalata*' — tin — another wink to the *The Wizard of Oz* story) allows Bárbara to retain control while exposing herself to aggression (the higher stakes in the second visit are revealed when Bárbara is handed out a blank card). Bárbara enters a scenario that adopts the allegorical iconography of the fairy tale, but depends on the stark economic logic of austerity. This is literalized when she disrobes and a naked Bárbara is seen in long shot, her skin fully covered by old scars that form a chaotic body map (see **Fig.#6**). In order to earn enough credit to guarantee the survival of her way of life — the fantasy of 'the good life' promised by capitalism — Bárbara voluntarily subjects herself to excruciating pain, as much as the body can possibly take, an act that we are invited to read not so much as a climax but as a repetition.

FIGURE #6

Caption: **Bárbara's submission to the dynamics of debt (Courtesy of Aquí y Allí Films)**

Heavily coded but eschewing actual images of graphic violence (Bárbara's torture is never shown on screen), the sequences at Zoco's mansion take Bárbara and the spectator into an alternative space of fantasy that however refers back to the nation ('Spain') not just as a

setting, but as a symptom that binds the characters together. Zoco's uncalled for yet bold central speech about the essence of the Spanish character, Damián and Luis's casual conversation about the state of education in the country (before the former kills the latter) or the traditional *copla* 'La niña de fuego' (sung by Manolo Caracol) that joins Damián and Bárbara spatially function as contingent clues scattered through the mise-en-scène. *Magical Girl* presents normality (and normativity) in crisis Spain as 'an aspirational and as an evolving and incoherent cluster of hegemonic promises about the present and future experience of social belonging that can be entered into in a number of ways, in affective transactions that take place alongside the more instrumental ones' (Berlant 2011, 167). Such transactions are geared to secure the good life capitalism promises, oblivious to the deterioration of the social fabric implicit wherein.

Through genre themes and anti-naturalistic performances, *Magical Girl* offers, more than any of the films discussed, a chilling view of an atomized society where the narrative of social progress has become stagnant (significantly, the child that causes the various acts of self-sacrifice has no future) and the agency of individuals is eroded by different forms of debt, of which Bárbara's scarred body may be just the most conspicuous symptom. *Magical Girl* closes with the same tantalizing gesture that started the story. A hand tended forward offers a hidden valuable object in response to the other's demand (first the young Bárbara to Damián, then the elderly Damián to the adult Bárbara). Yet when the hand opens, the palm is empty — a sleight of hand that endlessly perpetuates the state of indebtedness.

FIGURES #7 and #8 (tiled)

Caption: **A sleight of hand. ‘ Give [it] to me / I can’t / Why can’t you ?/ Because I don’t have it’— the magical gesture and words that open and close *Magical Girl* (Courtesy of Aquí y Allí Films).**

Reading gesture and crisis — A conclusion

As Berlant points out, ‘citizenship, in its formal and informal senses of social belonging, is also an affective state where attachments that matter take shape’ (2011, 163). The films I have examined have little in common with the raw struggles around work and joblessness depicted in *Rosetta*, a film which scholars like O’Shaughnessy and Berlant adopt as model text for the critical discussion of precarity under neoliberalism. Yet by puncturing their social scenarios with solipsistic gestures of self-harm, these films speak of the invisible routinization and internalization of states of crisis. My analysis has drawn attention to the ways in which *Wounded*, *Stockholm* and *Magical Girl* share with other examples of social cinema a commitment to look at subjectivities under capitalism, and to make visible the fractures in the social fabric in times of crisis. And yet, the disconnection between affective engagement and performative action suggests a somatic poetics that punctures the fantasy bubble of normativity as defined by neoliberal forms of social belonging.

These non-stories of the crisis thus work as thought experiments on subjectivity and citizenship. All three films arguably dramatize the stagnation of a social narrative of progress characteristic of previous forms of social cinema. When private relationships and affects (in friendships, the couple, or the family) become inoperative as sources of reparative affect, only violence can restore that link. Yet the gestures of self-harm in these films are neither the outcome of the crisis, nor carry a conscious form of political resistance. Instead, these gestures are tokens of performances of frustrated energy and detachment, which make the

body a literal interface between the normalization of states of crisis, and the outward expression of disturbance of everyday relations. These embodied gestures signal a performative mode in the cinema of the crisis, contiguous with, yet clearly apart from, the socially reparative, future-oriented gestures in the representational cinema of this period (*In a Foreign Land* or *Cerca de tu casa* being two examples). In contrast, to paraphrase O'Shaughnessy, the non-relational gestures of self-harm in *Wounded*, *Stockholm* and *Magical Girl* lack an elaborated politics — suffering passes through the body and is constantly threatened with meaninglessness (2007, 128).

Toscano and Kinkle conclude that ‘anxiety is perhaps the dominant mood of today’s efforts at cognitive mapping’ (2014, 240). The films examined tackle the crisis as an aesthetic rather than as a representational problem: divorcing gesture from affect through performative detachment, exposed gashes and bleeding wounds register such anxiety. If read beyond its restricted meaning, as a poetic device, the gesture of self-harm stands out as an indicator of emotions that may be harnessed into political affects — and therefore into sentient forms of citizenship — through a refusal to comply with the unacceptable demands upon bodies (and souls) imposed by the state of crisis.³

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Attenberg (Athina Rachel Tsangari, 2010)

Cerca de tu casa (Eduard Cortés, 2016)

En tierra extraña/ In a Foreign Land (Icíar Bollaín, 2014)

Kynodontas/ Dogtooth (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2009)

La chispa de la vida/ As Luck Would Have it (Álex de la Iglesia, 2012)

La herida/Wounded (Fernando Franco, 2013)

La punta del iceberg/ The Tip of the Iceberg (David Cánovas, 2016)

Magical Girl (Carlos Vermut, 2014)

Stockholm (Rodrigo Sorogoyen, 2013)

Abstract

This article looks at three fiction films released between 2012 and 2014 which, while not directly addressing the recessionary context figure the female body as the visual site of crisis. *La herida* (*Wounded*), *Stockholm* and especially *Magical Girl* construe a vocabulary of embodied gestures. One in particular recurs time and again: a woman wilfully wounding her body. In films otherwise fraught with narrative gaps and ambiguities, gashes and wounds stubbornly remain visible evidence in search of a cause. Furthering ongoing critical conversation about cinema in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, this paper connects performative gestures with states of diminished agency and the stagnation of the narrative of social change underpinning the Spanish cinema of the democracy. I look in particular at the acting styles on display in these films, and the ways that they bring to the fore the alienation that estranges subjects from their bodies. Eschewing allegorical readings of the wounded female body as a symptom of the national body in crisis, a somatic poetics is deployed to

capture the de-nationalised filmic construction of affective states that speak of broken social links contaminated by the dynamics of neoliberal debt.

Keywords

Spanish cinema – financial crisis – affect – embodiment – self-harming women

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